

Nigerian Popular Music: Its Problems and Prospects in Development

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Abstract

There is hardly any aspect of life without the involvement of any of the diverse arrays of styles existing in Nigerian popular music scene. The appeal of this genre cuts across class, ethnicity, age, sex and faith, thus affecting millions of lives. Consequently, the contribution of Nigerian popular music cannot be quantified. This paper examines the trend in the evolution of popular music, the challenges faced by the music industry, the role and contributions of popular music in development, and finally makes recommendations for the optimal development of the industry. Among other findings, the study revealed that the most successful compositions are those whose lyrics capture the concerns and are involved in the development of the society. Hence gospel musicians have more patronage than other types of popular music. Popular music which the populace from diverse affiliations and background identifies with, helps create new identities and forge broad cultural solidarity which contributes in no small measure to sustainable development of the country.

Introduction

Popular music in Nigeria reflects the country's multi-ethnic population as well as the pervasive influence of the Western culture in the society through a diverse array of styles such as juju, highlife, *fujji*, *akuko n'egwu*, *apala*, reggae, punk, funk, gospel, makosa, hip-hop, afro-beat, country, disco, *waka*, congo, jazz, disco and rhythm and blues. Of all the genres of music existing in Nigeria, popular music alone as a result of its

Ijeoma I. Forchu

characteristically urgent appeal and simplicity (people can easily understand and participate without prior training) transcends ethnicity, religion, geography, gender, age and socio-economic considerations. Consequently, it ranks high among the entertainment sectors. This is not surprising as music, being an integral aspect of African culture is also an agent of economic empowerment.

In Nigerian popular arena, three broad types can be discerned, namely:

- i. Traditional popular music with roots in indigenous music, for example *apala*, *waka*, *sakara* and *fujji* from Yorubaland; *akuko n'egwu* from Igboland; and *goje* music from Northern Nigeria.
- ii. Nigerian popular styles that emerged as a result of interaction between local and Western music cultures, for instance, highlife, juju, afro-beat and afro-rock.
- iii. Nigerian versions of foreign styles. As many types of music as possible from all over the world have their Nigerian versions such as disco, blues, hip-hop, jive, rock'n'roll, rhythm and blues, country, raga, jazz, rap, gospel, reggae, calypso, makosa, congo, and different types of South African music. Unfortunately, with few exceptions most of this type turns out to be poor imitations rather than creative transformations.

Unlike traditional music which met the needs of individual communities, popular music must appeal and meet the needs of people from different ethnic groups. In order to survive, therefore, it must as a necessity be nationalized and designed to be relevant to the contemporary populace. Hence traditional music formed the basis of popular music and Nigerian popular musicians from diverse ethnic groups, within their various styles and in varying degrees maintained some African musical features and at the same time incorporated some Western musical idioms

The role of Nigerian popular music

There is hardly any aspect of life without the involvement of music. Just as the traditional music is vital to the continued existence of the traditional society and culture, so also is popular music necessary for the survival of contemporary Nigerian social life. Of all the genres of music existing in contemporary Nigerian society, popular music in one form or the other is of great importance because its ability to appeal cuts across class, ethnic groups, age, nationality, gender and faith, thus affecting millions of people. The uncertainties of life, helplessness and impotence in the face of the prevailing socio-economic hardships have resulted to a lot of patronage of the gospel musician whose music provides solace from the scores of material and spiritual problems.

The fact that Nigerians are able to survive enormous hardship caused by economic, political, religious and social and ethnic instabilities requires that some credit be rendered to popular music for it contributes in no small measure to the alleviation of the stress and strain connected with these conditions through entertainment and relaxation. The general well-being of individuals is achieved, which results to a more stable society and higher productivity (Collins: 2001).

Apart from entertainment and relaxation, Nigerian popular music contributes significantly to other areas of human endeavour. The impact of the popular music on the national economy cannot be overestimated. Nigerian popular music has been able to raise the standard of living by creating more job opportunities in the nation. The establishment of subsidiary industries, which have created jobs and incomes for the musicians and the personnel of the recording studios, storage and marketing agencies, is a direct consequence of the music industry in Nigeria.

The patronage of popular music helps create new identities and social bond, and consequently, stability in the country. This is because individuals with age-long and deep-seated animosities from various faiths, geographical locations, ethnic groups, socio-economic and educational backgrounds can identify with it. Agu explained that 'music is one of the strongest tools for cultural uniqueness and self identity in the life of any

society', (2007: 16). Concerning the unstable nature of the African nations and the role music can play in it, Sen stated, 'Music is not only a great harmonious influence in general, it can also assist in sustaining broad cultural solidarity and to some extent help to resist the inter-group rivalry that cause so much bloodshed in Africa and elsewhere' (2004). It is a well-known fact that there is sustainable development where there is no conflict.

The song text 'reflects mechanisms of psychological release and the prevailing attitudes and values of a culture' (Merriam; 1964: 204). Thus the lyrics of the Nigerian popular musicians capture the concerns of the Nigerian society – protection, survival, material prosperity, belief in God, fear of the supernatural, love unity and stability. The song text is a very powerful tool and when employed tactfully contributes inestimably to the general well-being of individuals. It is very effective at the 'vanguard of protest movements' and gives eloquence to voices that are otherwise muted and muffled' (Sen: 2001). For example Fela Kuti, the most famous Nigerian musician to date, through the medium of music consistently, controversially and confrontationally condemned the perpetrators of the social and political injustice – the military government of his time – thereby addressing issues hitherto unspeakable (1979).

Song texts are indicators of culture (Merriam, 1964:205; Akpabot, 1986: 97) rich in insights into concepts, value systems, societal norms and behaviours. Just like traditional music, popular music also helps to maintain the continuity of the tradition including history and literature through their beautiful verses rich in onomatopoeia, figures of speech, idioms and proverbs.

Popular music is an agent of social control as it is sometimes used to regulate social order in the form of reward and punishment through admonition and ridicule, in effect, it inculcates good morals. Popular music provides information through the song text as to the social, political and economic climate within and outside the society.

Public enlightenment and government's mobilization programs are made very effective through the enlisting of popular and glamorous personalities, particularly the popular musicians, for instance Onyeka

Onwenu and Sunny Ade's advertisement on family planning in the national television network, brought the message home to millions of Nigerians.

Music used in advertisement is probably where the Nigerian popular musicians excel. For example, the music used for the enlightenment campaign by the National Agency for Food Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), which is a master piece, while articulating most effectively the message of the agency, is at the same time very entertaining. Nigerian popular music is a source of foreign exchange through the international patronage of popular music by Nigerians in diasporas and other nationals, particularly, African nationals.

Members of the society, especially the youth are in constant contact with popular music. Consequently popular musicians have a lot of influence in the society, for the type of music one listens to contributes in shaping one's attitude. Musicians, therefore, must be careful with what they produce since it has the ability to influence both negatively and positively. It is noteworthy that musicians, whose lyrics capture the concerns and are involved with the development of the society, are usually more successful than those whose songs deal with abstract and negative themes. For that reason gospel musicians have more patronage than other types of popular music. This is particularly evident in eastern Nigeria where Gospel music comprises more than 50% of all popular music.

Popular music helps to create the right atmosphere for myriad social and religious activities. The sound of some types of music including popular music is imbued with the power of rejuvenation on the mind (resulting in creativity) and the body (through instilling fresh energy).

In recognition of their contribution towards the development of Nigeria through music, some Nigerian musicians have been recipients of national honours. They include Alhaji (Dr.) Mamman Shata, Sir Victor Uwaifo, Lawrence Emeka, Nelly Uchendu, Mary Affi Usua and Dan Maraya Jos.

Factors militating against the music industry in Nigeria

The contribution of music in general and popular music in particular to the economic, social and ultimately national stability is unfortunately not

nearly acknowledged, hence the aspersions cast on popular musicians.

The Nigerian music industry is not properly organized and managed; squabbles and bickering abound among union members and this naturally affects the production, distribution and marketing of music. As a result there is the lack of existence of a body which guarantees the adequate collection and payment of royalties; musicians sign away the rights to their music (Seligman: 2001), impoverishing themselves by so doing. This unfortunate scenario is worsened by a plethora of corrupt, fraudulent and incompetent tour producers and managers whom the artists rely upon to manage their tours from which some of their sources of income are generated. The result is that many musicians resort to organizing these tours by themselves and of course this is done at the expense of professionalism in both musical performance and tour management.

In contrast to the practice in the traditional society where the musician is accorded due respect and merited honour just like other members of the society, and in Europe and America where musicians are idolized, the contemporary Nigerian musician has to contend with prejudice against him by the society. This stems from the blind imitation of their Western counterparts in their mannerisms, dress code on stage and off stage (very often they appear over dressed and sometimes almost nude), eccentricity, promiscuity, use of hard drugs and the attendant social implications. This affects negatively the sensibility of the general populace.

Just as there is 'low government priority for music sector' (Collins; 2001) in Ghana, the same applies to Nigeria. The policy makers fail to realize that music is a potential foreign exchange earner particularly at a time when most of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings come from the oil segment alone. This is a dangerous situation for the nation because of the volatility of the oil sector. It is imperative that there be economic diversification.

The Nigerian music industry is being strangled by some unfavorable policies by the government; the nation's currency with its incessant depreciation deals a great blow to the industry since the prices of modern musical equipments are exorbitant and often impossible for producers and musicians alike to procure. This results in the purchase of

cheaper, out-dated and ultimately inferior musical instruments, recording and storage equipments and facilities. In the cases where the correct instruments and facilities are available, the availability of manpower and proper maintenance of these equipments are unattainable. In effect, the quality of music produced in Nigeria is always substandard. Consequently, some musicians resort to recording their music outside the country leading to loss of job opportunities and revenues by Nigerians which would have been had were they recorded in the country.

The Nigerian copyright law and its weak implementation protects only art works that are recorded, written or fixed to a material form, but offers no protection whatsoever to live performances. As a result bootlegging and piracy abound. An estimate of the piracy level is between 85% to 90% in West Africa in general, and more than 50% in Nigeria (Seligman: 2001; Reichman: 2001).

To a large extent lack of a formal education in music undermines the Nigerian music scene. Many Nigerian musicians are not well educated in general and particularly in the field of music. The problem is worsened by the difficult and stringent measures which have to be undertaken in order to gain admission into institutes of higher learning, which is out of the reach of many would-be musicians. It is clear that without proper education in music, the professionalism of the musicians would be compromised. The consequence is a very poor application of rudiments, theory and principles of music which often results in an inferior end product. Even those receiving formal education in music in higher institutions have an unsuitable curriculum to work with. The transplanting of African higher education institutions from their Western background into the African social structure (Asie-Lumumba, 2006) results in the curriculum emphasizing the Western art music (which only a very small fraction of the society understands and appreciates) at the expense of the contemporary Nigerian music which is made up of mainly traditional and popular music (which everybody in the society uses). They consequently are unable to tap into their training most effectively in order to contribute optimally to music and advancement in general.

Some of the general social vices of Nigerian culture also affect the

popular music scene. One such vice is the 'get-rich-quick' syndrome without regards to the means. The outcome is that in the bid to acquire much wealth in the shortest possible time some musicians do not take enough time and caution to compose, arrange and produce their music. Thus slip shod music often results.

In accordance with the 'fake product' syndrome whereby the imitation of genuine foreign products abound and are deceptively passed off and sold as genuine goods, the Nigerian popular music vista is likewise replete with indiscriminate and usually poor imitation of foreign popular music forms like disco, hip-hop, rock, soul, and many others, thereby losing out on originality and producing bad taste. This is unfortunate as there is an emerging interest, demand and consumption of African traditional and popular music with real African musical instruments – drums, horns, flutes etc. Sadly, the new trend among young musicians whereby they use drum machines, synthesizers and computerized rhythms, destroy the desired distinctive African flavour by the Western consumers. Thus the music has patronage locally and loses out on the more lucrative international market. In addition, the displacement of performing Nigerian musicians by some of these advanced technological devices result in loss of job opportunities and income by some categories of instrumentalists.

Instability and insecurity in the country, sometimes resulting in violence, necessitates the imposition of curfews which are death sentences to live performances. The loss of audience participation as more social occasions rely on recorded music (which is cheaper and easier to obtain) rather than live bands, is a challenge which the musicians have to face. The musicians are therefore unable to accurately gauge the emotions generated by their music, and in effect may not be able to adequately adjust their music and performances to be more suitable to the audience.

Constant power outage adds to the already beleaguered situation of the industry through loss of several hours of work and finances as musicians have to wait for electricity to be restored, and as they are forced to resort to more expensive alternative sources of power. The fluctuation of the voltage and quality of electricity results in the damage of musical equipments.

Song texts are very important tools and as such when employed tactfully by musicians become very powerful and can be used to positively influence contemporary issues. Unfortunately however, many Nigerian musicians do not always treat topical concerns that affect individuals and the society at large, rather they often sing about abstract and sometimes immoral subjects which are not conducive to the promotion of the interest of the members of the society.

Airing of music by the radio and television stations is a market strategy by musicians. Sometimes these media houses do not acknowledge the numerous talented and proficient musicians whose music they play. This results in the loss of revenue by composers.

Conclusion

The engine of economic growth is the private sector, and if the music industry (which gives rise to a number of businesses such as recording, reproduction, storage, marketing, packaging and distribution, is therefore a part of the private sector) is well organized, a huge amount of money could be realized which would translate into economic empowerment to individual musicians and those associated with service industries, and consequently the nation as a whole.

The exportation of Nigerian music needs to be accorded due attention particularly at this time when 85% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earning and 70% of the revenue of the government is provided by the oil sector alone (Stiglitz, 2004). Not only will the massive exportation of Nigerian popular music, in addition to the production and manufacturing sectors, relieve the congestion on the oil industry, it will help diversify the economy away from the oil segment. This is very crucial because of the volatility of the oil market. It will also provide an alternative and act as a cushioning effect to petroleum exportation in the eventuality of a substitute to oil as fuel or in the case of the exhaustion of the nation's oil reserves. It is interesting to note that in the 1970s Sweden's main export was music and that the ABBA music group contributed more than 70% of it through music.

Some of the highest earning individuals all over the world are

successful show business men and women such as musicians, actors/actresses and sportsmen/sportswomen. These star artists and sportspersons are idolized by their Western fans. For instance Elvis Presley's home in the United States of America is still a regular place of pilgrimage by his fans several years after his death. One could imagine that the impact on Nigeria for producing many world acclaimed musicians who would have Western fans would be unprecedented economically. Not only would these musicians be like ambassadors of Nigeria, they would also aid in advertising the country and definitely attract and promote tourism.

The study of the Humanities – art, literature and music should never be undermined. A close survey of the annals of the developed nations would reveal that the arts had very important position in their domestic plan. For instance, the Italian economic success is directly attributable to their artistic tradition – superior and better industrial designs of their products. This is a direct consequence of several years until very recently of subsidy and support of the arts including music, by the government. Thus music motivates the sciences, technology, medicine, commerce, religion and all other aspects of life. Therefore the support for music by the African governments should be much more than what it is, for music cannot be divorced from the daily activities of the African from birth to death.

It is noteworthy that the best of Africans in their various professional fields – scholars, playwrights, artists, musicians and so forth are those whose works were influenced and who borrowed immensely from their cultural heritage, for instance Chinua Achebe, Ben Enwonwu, Miriam Makeba, to name but a few. Nigerian musicians, therefore, have a treasure in their cultural heritage.

There is need for a change of curriculum in Nigerian schools of music, where music that is mainly used in the society – traditional and popular music – are given deserved merit and studied in their own right. Also the personnel of music industry (musicians, technicians, producers, publishers, advertisers, printers, marketers and the music educator) should be given focused and relevant training in order to be able to be self reliant in their

musical endeavour.

All over the world in both the developing and developed countries there is a growing consumption of music irrespective of class and age; Nigerian music should, therefore, be encouraged and developed in order to have a fair share in this phenomenon which will empower more musicians economically and shore up the nation's economy. Nigerian musicians should also take advantage of this international interest and demand for African music and produce Nigerian music with originality not merely imitating the Western trends.

It is necessary to discourage aspersion on the arts especially music, by the society. After all in the traditional African society in general (with few exceptions on certain occasions) as well as the Western society, musicians are highly esteemed. Musicians on their part should learn to comport themselves responsibly.

Creation of new job opportunities for musicians and those working in the subsidiary industries like cassette factories, recording studios and marketing will be a direct consequence of more local consumption as well as exportation of Nigerian music.

There is the need for a more effective use of the indigenous radio and television stations to promote and encourage Nigerian musicians by playing more Nigerian music and giving proper acknowledgement and remuneration to the musicians whose music are aired.

Nigerian popular music could and does contribute to stability and harmony since their music affably bring people together in Nigeria where there exists rifts and often deep-seated animosities among the different ethnic groups and religions. They can be utilized to serve the vital role of unification.

The indices for sustainable development which are the availability of the basic necessities of life, self esteem and the freedom of economic and social choices, all these resulting in the general well-being of individuals and the larger society, have all in various degrees been enhanced by Nigerian popular music. Consequently, this genre as a result of its multifaceted quality, when encouraged and used properly at all level, will greatly be improved upon and will lend itself further as an indispensable

implement in the advancement of sustainable, holistic human development.

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